

Keeping it clear:

Where the zebras and wildebeest roam

March 23, 2004

By Steven Gutkin, Associated Press KITENGELA, Kenya

No other place on Earth boasts such a wide variety of wild animals so close to a bustling metropolis. Lions, giraffes, and ostriches roam freely against a backdrop of skyscrapers and jets landing at Kenya's international airport.

But because of people moving in and fences going up in areas around the Nairobi National Park, zebras and wildebeest - and the lions who stalk them - may soon have no way of migrating to southern grasslands during the rainy season and back into the park, where water is plentiful during the dry season.

Now the government and wildlife foundations are paying the Maasai, the famed warrior tribe of central Kenya, to not farm or fence in some land as a way to keep the migration corridor clear. In another conservation step, tribespeople also are being compensated whenever a lion kills their livestock, as long as they let the lion live.

These unusual efforts come none too soon on a continent that in the past century has lost half its forests and a significant chunk of its wildlife to land development, agriculture, industry, and poachers.

Protected game reserves like the Nairobi National Park make up about 8 percent of Kenya's land mass, though more than three-quarters of the wildlife is outside the reserves.

"A lot of structures are coming up," said Maasai community leader Godfrey Ntapayia, pointing to a cement factory at the edge of the 850-square-kilometer (330-square-mile) wildlife corridor that links the Nairobi National Park to southern Kenya's Amboseli region. "These industries are encouraging construction around the dispersal (migration) area. People are buying land and erecting a lot of fences."

The area around the capital is not the only wildlife corridor under threat. Of particular concern is the region between the Serengeti in northern Tanzania and the Masai Mara area of southern Kenya, whose dazzling array of wildlife has been reduced by 60 percent since the mid-1970s.

But the problem is most pronounced in the Kitengela area south of Nairobi, where private property has replaced the Maasai's traditional system of collective land ownership and where farming has begun to replace cattle raising.

The corridor is already 70 percent blocked, said Environment Minister Newton Kulundu. This has led to a marked increase in "human-wildlife conflicts," he added, with Maasai tribesmen killing lions who prey on their cattle and wildebeest destroying fences and crops to clear the migration path.

Residents of the region killed 11 lions last year, about the same number as in each of the previous four years. But no lions - a threatened though not an acutely endangered species - have been reported killed in 2004, giving hope that the two-

year-old compensation program may be bearing fruit.

"I like to see lions," said 42-year-old Maasai shepherd James Turere, who said he's killed numerous lions in his lifetime but stopped when he started getting money for lost livestock. "Other places don't have so many animals like we do. It's something special," he said.

A total of 115 Maasai families in the Kitengela area are now receiving the equivalent of US\$4 a month per acre in exchange for not farming or erecting fences on their land.

This so-called lease program protects 8,500 acres (3,400 hectares), or only about 4 percent of the corridor, said Paul Gathitu Masela, the senior warden at the Nairobi National Park. However, the land being "leased" is often located in the most critical areas for animal crossings, such as near roads and rivers, he added.

Masela said authorities would like to increase the protected area to 50,000 acres (20,000 hectares) but that lack of money means that 15,000 acres (6,000 hectares) already on a waiting list are not being leased.

This latest holdup points up problems that have plagued Kenyan conservation efforts for many years: lack of funds, coordination, and government support. The lease program has proven to be a sensitive issue with the Maasai, many of whom have bitter memories of the British colonial annexation of their tribal lands.

The good news is that recent years have seen a major shift in attitude among Kenyan tribes who now often see wildlife as a tourism resource to be exploited rather than vermin to be destroyed.

"Twenty years ago our young Maasai warriors used to go around killing the animals," said David Koshal, a Maasai wildlife guide in the Masai Mara reserve. "Things are changing now. They know that there are benefits to be had from these lions, these animals."

The Maasai are now seeking ways to funnel park entry fees and other tourism-related revenue into their communities. Schools, dams, and cattle dips have been built. The government and conservation groups are encouraging tribespeople to develop camp sites for safari-goers and to sell handicrafts rather than cultivate the land.

But critics say these programs are unlikely to arrest the most troubling trends. What's needed, they say, is a national land-use policy that will simply forbid human encroachment on wildlife corridors.

Environment Minister Kulundu said such a policy is currently under review and stands a good chance of being passed.

The animals that migrate are mostly wildebeest and zebras in search of more nutritious short grass in the wet season. They are followed by vultures, jackals, hyenas, and lions.

"From the beginning the Maasai have lived together with animals," said Maasai community leader Samuel Matanda, a 45-year-old father of seven. "We don't want our children just to see animals in paintings."